DISWOMEN STRIKE BACK? THE EVOLUTION OF DISNEY'S *FEMMES* IN THE 1990s[1]

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> Girls bored me—they still do. I love Mickey Mouse more than any woman I've ever known.
>
> Walt Disney qtd. in Wagner, *You Must Remember This*

The tendency to rewrite traditional fairy and folk tales has flourished in the world of Hollywood cinema with the cultural and commercial icon of Walt Disney. The dramatic transformation of literary fairy tales, nonetheless, has been problematic, since Disney's animated fairy-tale adaptations have systematically undergone a process involving sanitization and Americanization, two distinctive features to compound the so-called "Disneyfication" of folklore and popular culture. Disney's machinery transformed a child-oriented genre into a mass-oriented vehicle disguised as innocent entertainment while simultaneously portraying power relations and adult sexuality. As Jack Zipes claims, "[Disney] employed animators and technology to stop thinking about change, to return to his films, and to long nostalgically for neatly ordered patriarchal realms" (40). By developing an appealing cinematic language of fantasy, Disney's fairy tales often manage to conceal a suspicious ideology concerning sexual, race and class politics. In this respect, the construction of Disney's heroines has become a controversial site for discussion in terms of stereotyped femininity and sexuality following the demands of a pervasive patriarchal system. Referring to the story of *Snow White*, Zipes argues that "the house for the Grimms and Disney was the place where good girls remained, and one shared aspect of the fairy tale and the film is about the domestication of women" (37). Like-

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wise, feminist critic Elizabeth Bell claims, "[w]ith the logo 'Walt Disney Pictures,' Disney wrote his name and ownership on the folk stories of women, creating indelible images of the feminine" ("Somatexts" 108). Nevertheless, Disney's imaginary cannot be defined in terms of a single and straightforward conservative ideology, since it contains multiple ideological layers that must be interrogated, especially regarding the representation of gender. This article examines the evolution undergone by some of Disney's female characters through the first years of the so-called "Disney Decade" of the 1990s, paying special attention to the representation of sexual politics. Stephen Fjellman criticises Disney's biased rewriting of history by employing the term "Distory." Subverting his argument, I propose to coin the term "Diswomen" to refer to those female characters who trespass the boundaries of Disney's traditional Manichean definition of femininity, becoming multi-faceted women who are successfully represented, consistent with a contemporary discourse on gender and sexuality.

The release of *The Little Mermaid* in 1989, a free adaptation of Andersen's classic, marked the rebirth of the Disney Corporation as one of the largest multinationals in America. Regarding the representation of gender, Disney's construction of the teenage mermaid Ariel generated the beginning of an ideological debate among feminist scholars. As Laura Sells explains, "the mermaid figure becomes both an icon of bourgeois feminism and a sign of the stakes in reinventing the category of "woman," or reimagining women as speaking subjects" (177). A different line in criticism describes Ariel as "the very embodiment of consumer-fetishism" due to her compulsive need to collect multiple human objects (Byrne and McQuillan 23). Similarly, it has been argued that Ariel was modelled after a "slightly anorexic Barbie doll" (Giroux, *The Mouse* 99) with "thin waist and prominent bust" (O'Brien 173) thus portraying a dangerous model for young women. Moreover, the female community is limited in Disney's film when compared to Andersen's fairy tale, since Ariel's friends are male and her sisters work as "agents of patriarchy," as O'Brien claims. Even so, several critics have cited *The Little Mermaid* (1989) as the turning point signalling the studio's new openness in sexual and gender roles, since Ariel systematically rebels against the norm of the Father, aspires to grow intellectually and strives to achieve agency in the film (Bell, 1995; Deleyto, 2003). It is interesting to remember that it is Ariel who initially saves a male human being from drowning, thus transgressing her father's rules and proving her courage and determinacy. Nonetheless, it is Disney's construction of Ursula the sea-witch that introduces subversive readings of the film in terms of sexual and power politics. By means of using her extreme power,

Ursula not only manipulates Ariel at will but manages to trick Triton, the symbol of patriarchal law. Physically, the sea-witch is drawn as a queer predatory monster with a grotesque overwhelming body that occupies the whole screen. Trites argues that Ursula's menacing body reflects Disney's negative tendency to depict older women as predatory villains (qtd. in O'Brien 179). Her monstrous body, however, transgresses multiple boundaries, becoming a potential site for feminist pleasure. As Mary Russo has argued, "the grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change [...] opposed to the classical body, which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek" (219). Moreover, Ursula's queerness subverts gender categories thus turning this female witch into an ironic positive figure; a "multiple cross-dresser," as Sells claims, who destabilises gender through her excess and theatricality (182). As a result, Ursula becomes a transgressive Diswoman, since she manages to subvert Disney's Manichean definition of femininity through her celebration of the grotesque and her gender performance.

Critical interest has also read Belle in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) as an intelligent active woman who reads passionately to escape the monotony of the French "provincial town," as she puts it. Susan Jeffords argues that "while the earlier Beauties were also avid readers, the Disney film marks Belle's interest as more of a social than a character feature, using it to distinguish Belle from the rest of the townspeople, marking her as better and less provincial than they are" (170). Jeffords even goes so far as to claim that "Belle is, for all intents and purposes, a Disney Feminist" (170). And what is more, Belle is not in the least interested in the type of excessive masculinity displayed by the primitive Gaston. Drawn as a caricature of the macho hero, Gaston still attracts the rest of the women in the film who swoon over him and comically faint when in his presence, becoming a parody of traditional femininity. The sort of masculinity embodied by Gaston is deliberately drawn to give way to the problematic character of the beast in Disney's film. As Jeffords explains, the 80s action hero type needed to be transformed into a family man, more in tune with domestic policies of the 1990s. Certainly the beast is a Byronic hero, a tormented man who needs to be re-educated to become a symbol for the "New Man" in order to represent a new kind of masculinity that will enable men to suffer, to love and to remain happily within the domestic realm. It is therefore reasonable to argue, as Marina Warner does, that Disney's version of *Beauty and the Beast* "is more vividly aware of contemporary sexual politics than any made before" (313).

Disney's evolution in the construction of heroines continues with Jasmine, the rebellious princess in *Aladdin* (1992). When she is first introduced in the film, the camera points at her back and yet, when she is about to turn, the aggressive face of a tiger bursts into the frame holding an item of male underwear. From this moment onwards, the representation of this female character is marked: she is a determined woman, who rejects patriarchal laws. One of the features distinguishing a contemporary Disney princess like Jasmine from previous heroines like Cinderella is that she realises the benefits of royalty. Aware of her father's inefficiency, Jasmine furiously warns the villain Jafar about his methods: "At least some good will come of my being forced to marry. When I am queen, I will have the power to get rid of you." The recognition of power is a mark of transition that differentiates Jasmine from traditional Disney females. Besides, she transgresses the viewers' expectations when she dares to kiss the sinister Jafar, a performance to protect her kingdom and his real lover, Aladdin. It is worth mentioning that Jasmine is the first Diswoman to ever kiss the villain, which enhances the possibilities for the genre of the animated fairy tale, giving way to new paths in terms of both narrative expectations and gender representation.

Moving into 1995, the construction of an independent, strong and wise female character like Pocahontas[2] opened uncharted spaces in the evolution of Diswomen in terms of sexual and power politics. Pocahontas' dissatisfaction subverts the conventions of previous Disney songs, since she expresses in "Just around the Riverbend" her thirst for adventure away from "a handsome sturdy husband/who builds handsome sturdy walls/ and never dreams that something might be coming." Pocahontas' wishes depart from those expressed by conventional heroines, since she not only rejects the compulsory union with Kocoum, the brave hero from her tribe, but also decides to leave John Smith, a Prince Charming figure representative of western colonizers. Furthermore, the movie *Pocahontas* is one of the first films in the Disney imaginary to widen the female community surrounding the heroine. Nakoma's friendship grants Pocahontas the strength to become one of the leaders in her tribe. Then, an older generation of women represented by the character of Grandmother Willow provide Pocahontas invaluable advice about which path to take in life, making her reconsider the implications of entering into a compulsory

[2] I am aware of the suspicious ideology surrounding the film *Pocahontas* with respect to historical accuracy and the racial depiction of Native Americans. Nevertheless, my discussion focuses on Disney's evolution in the representation of the heroine Pocahontas in terms of gender and sexuality. For an interesting reading of *Pocahontas* as a neocolonial narrative see Buescher and Ono's study (1996).

marriage. Moreover, Pocahontas's mother has dramatically shaped her daughter's character: she is confident, brave and politically committed to her people, traits she has inherited from her mother. As the Indian Wiseman proudly exclaims: "She has her mother's spirit. She goes wherever the wind takes her." The implications of rendering the inheritance of the mother's character as a positive force in woman's learning process shows Disney's attempt to integrate feminist discourses within the narrative of the animated fairy tales.

And yet, while bearing in mind the positive evolution of Diswomen like Belle or Pocahontas, it is the subversive construction of Esmeralda in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) that introduces radical changes in Disney's portrayal of female sexuality. Esmeralda, the exotic gypsy heroine is firstly furnished with a blatant sexuality by means of visual strategies. Her colourful and daring dress code clashes with previous Disney attire like Belle's, which mostly consisted of monochrome "serious" dresses. Esmeralda always sports a wide plunging neckline, making her breasts stand out, which contributes to her construction as a sexualised Diswoman. After the release of *The Hunchback*, critic John Kelly argued that "Esmeralda is drawn with more curves and beguiling shadows than you'll find in the typical Disney heroine" (1996). Furthermore, the Disney team employed a successful strategy to construct the character of Esmeralda by deploying actress Demi Moore's voice and manners, since the image of the celebrated actress has been sexualised from the late 1990s through films like *Striptease* (1996). Interestingly, both films were released in the same year, signalling Hollywood's shift in the representation of women's sexuality. Female characters could display a blatant sexuality without risking their inner goodness. As Amy Davis argues in her recent study of Disney's heroines, "by the 1990s, the notion that a woman could be both good and sexy had ceased to be such an unimaginable concept in representations of femininity in much of America's popular culture" (173). Therefore, by means of adopting Moore's voice and gestures, Esmeralda is effectively constructed under the new features of the 90s sexually active woman.

If we follow this line of argument, the character of Esmeralda becomes problematic, since she trespasses the boundaries of Disney's Manichean definition of femininity in various ways. Examining the techniques employed to construct some of Disney female villains, Bell explains that "[t]he evil women of Disney's films are the only female characters rendered in close-ups" ("Somatexts" 116). Nevertheless, this trait is altered in 90s Diswomen like Jasmine, Pocahontas or Esmeralda, some of the female heroines who do not conform to

traditional Anglo-Saxon features. In the case of Esmeralda, there are several close-ups worth interpreting, since they help to construct her as a dangerous and powerful heroine. As Janet Maslin points out, "in close-ups [Esmeralda] sometimes has the hard, bold features of a Marvel Comics action hero, which suits the aggressive side of this story" (1996). During the Feast of Fools sequence, Esmeralda is shot in close-up, framed mostly by her own dark curly hair. Her narrowing green emerald eyes and her arched eyebrows turn her face into a threatening explosion of beauty and provocation. According to Bell, this type of close-up is characteristic of the representation of Disney's *femme fatales*, to intensify "not only the women's evil natures—their unknowable interiors—but [to recall] primal fears and animal phobias, transforming their faces to the exterior icons of wolves and cats whose eyes glow in the dark" ("Somatexts" 117). Esmeralda thus subverts stereotyped definitions of femininity by becoming the first successful *femme fatale* heroine within Disney's universe.

Chris Cuomo argues that heroines like Belle or Ariel embody brightness, beauty and goodness, virtues which are enhanced due to an array of female wicked women constructed as witches (217). The paradigmatic Disney witch is the jealous queen in *Snow White*, who has become a cultural icon symbolising evil. As Zipes and others have noted, however, it is precisely these evil characters that are charged with an erotic subversive force, appealing to children and adults alike. Bell explains that "Disney transforms the vain, active, and wicked woman of folktales into the *femme fatale*, the 'deadly woman' of silent film and of Hollywood classic film" ("Somatexts" 115). In this respect, Esmeralda is bright and beautiful and yet, she is also active and sexualised, becoming an animated *femme fatale*. Jane Place describes the construction of the *femme fatale* in terms of the danger she poses to men. Esmeralda therefore can be read as an example of *femme fatale* in terms of the menace she poses to the evil Minister Frollo, symbol of the status quo. Then, commenting on the iconography surrounding Hollywood's *femme fatale*, Place argues that it is "explicitly sexual, and often explicitly violent as well: long hair (blond or dark), make-up and jewellery. [...] the iconography of violence [...] is a specific symbol [...] of her 'unnatural' phallic power" (54). In this respect, it is interesting to point out that Disney's heroines never use jewellery and yet Esmeralda transgresses this norm, since she wears one earring and some bracelets on her wrist and an anklet. Likewise, Esmeralda does participate in this violent and phallic iconography in several sections of the film. At the Feast of Fools, she bravely takes a knife from her leg, proving her deadly nature, and cuts the rope that traps the bellringer Quasimodo. She next escapes from lots of

obstacles by throwing soldiers' helmets like lethal discuses, capable of decapitating some of the men and thus proving her ability to survive in an aggressive society that oppresses her as an independent gypsy woman. After that, Esmeralda escapes Frollo and the law by parodying stereotyped images of femininity like weeping. The French feminist critic Luce Irigaray describes feminine masquerade as "the acting out by the female subject of a series of male-defined roles and script" (qtd. in Palmer 48). Irigaray then proposes the term "mimesis" as a weapon to demolish these male-defined constructs: "by parodically mimicking conventional images of femininity and introducing into her performance an element of excess, [Woman] can expose the artifice and inauthenticity of these images" (49). In this respect, Esmeralda's conscious attempt to use stereotypes to her own benefit contributes to reading her as a transgressive Diswoman. In *The Little Mermaid*, Ursula teaches Ariel "the artifice and trappings of gendered behaviour" (Sells 183). Esmeralda, however, has already acquired that knowledge as proof of her construction not as an innocent teenager but as a sexually experienced woman.

It is interesting to investigate the processes by which the sexuality and power of Hollywood and Disney's *femmes fatale* remain intact even though they are eliminated from the narrative through death or domestication. As Place suggests, "the visual style gives her such freedom of movement and dominance that it is her strength and sensual visual texture that is inevitably printed in our memory, not her ultimate destruction" (63). These heroines stand as symbols of an appealing sexuality for both women and men, and their fascinating power remains even when they physically vanish. Esmeralda is partly tamed in the course of the narrative when she loses her independent spirit by sharing her cause with Phoebus, a soldier. Her sexuality also diminishes at the end of the film through a change in *mise-en-scène* elements like clothing or lighting. Nevertheless, in spite of Disney's attempts to domesticate the sexualised heroine, Esmeralda manages to escape her own construction. Demi Moore's voice is still heard and the intensity of previous images portraying her dancing or fighting against a corrupted law represented by the cruel Frollo remains. Her sexuality thus cannot be tamed, since it has already permeated the audience's senses. Furthermore, Bell argues that Disney *femme fatales* are doomed ("Somatexts" 118). Esmeralda, however, survives.

A very significant moment in the construction of Esmeralda is the dance sequence at the Feast of Fools. She pops out of a cloud of smoke, simulating a magic trick or even an instance of witchcraft. An exuberant young woman showing her dancing and gymnastic abili-

ties with a twofold purpose: to earn a living and to participate in the carnival experience. When Esmeralda takes a soldier's long spear, she sticks it on the stage and starts her performance, as if dancing on a bar. The spear and the way she sticks it demonstrate her phallic power, a common trait of Hollywood's *femmes fatales*, as I previously argued. In addition, it should be borne in mind that dancing has often been read as a metaphor for the sexual act. Subsequently, when Esmeralda dances on her own, she is not only succumbing to male desire, but actually enjoying her own sexuality. In examining the construction of some of Disney's heroines following the lines of classical ballet, Bell argues that "[t]he markers of class [...] are covertly embodied in the metaphors of classical dance" ("Somatexts" 110). In this sense, the dance sequences in *The Beauty and the Beast* clash ideologically with Esmeralda's performance in "The Feast of Fools," since they become a display of royalty and bearing. According to Bell, "the Disney apparatus buys into and then sells the twofold fantasy of little girls who want to grow up to be princesses and ballerinas" (111). In this sense, even though the character of Belle anticipates certain proto-feminist traits, she ultimately resembles traditional Disney's heroines like Cinderella or Aurora in that all of them obtain material triumph by becoming princesses of the castle and with it, all the essential accomplishments their class would require like becoming a talented dancer. In contrast, Esmeralda dances for money and for the pleasure of expressing her blatant sexuality, which opens up new possibilities for the construction of Diswomen in terms of gender and class politics.

Challenging to decode and interpret, Esmeralda becomes one of the most complex female characters in Disney's imaginary. As Doane argues, the paradigmatic *femme fatale* "never really is what she seems to be. She harbors a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable" (1). Drawn as a multi-faceted woman, Esmeralda is indeed unpredictable, since she is simultaneously able to perform a sexual dance, stand as a devoted admirer of God, become a defender of social injustice and act as a powerful *femme fatale*. She resists stereotyped images of femininity and is successfully represented, consistent with a contemporary discourse on gender and sexuality.

As a final thought, I propose to go back where everything started. When the beautiful but wicked queen is transformed into an old crone, she tempts the naïve Snow White with a bright scarlet apple. However, the fruit is poisonous. Disney's heroine succumbs to the temptation and bites the forbidden fruit falling into a sleeping death. In my view, part of the critical institution tends to obliterate Disney

films, since they are rendered as "rotten apples." Their enchanting, colourful and cheerful exterior layer hides a problematic ideology promoting endless dangerous "–isms" like American imperialism, consumerism, racism, sexism and so on. However, as I have endeavoured to demonstrate, there are some resistant spaces in Disney's animated fairy tales that subvert the conservative ideology of early classics to incorporate contemporary discourses regarding sexuality and power. As Byrne and McQuillan claim, "the Disney text [...] is a site for the *representation* of the conflicting ideologies in operation in Western society at the time of production and so therefore has a non-simple relation to American cultural and economic imperialism" (19-20). Therefore, even though it is still a long time before we can speak about successful feminist representations in a commercial icon like Disney, recent films incorporate complex female characters that are worth taking into consideration.

Notes

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